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Should we be concerned about the vitamin D status of athletes?

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A surprisingly high prevalence of vitamin D insufficiency and deficiency has recently been reported worldwide. Although very little is known about vitamin D status among athletes, a few studies suggest that poor vitamin D status is also a problem in athletic populations. It is well recognized that vitamin D is necessary for optimal bone health, but emerging evidence is finding that vitamin D deficiency increases the risk of autoimmune diseases and nonskeletal chronic diseases and can also have a profound effect on human immunity, inflammation, and muscle function (in the elderly). Thus, it is likely that compromised vitamin D status can affect an athlete's overall health and ability to train (i.e., by affecting bone health, innate immunity, and exercise-related immunity and inflammation). Although further research in this area is needed, it is important that sports nutritionists assess vitamin D (as well as calcium) intake and make appropriate recommendations that will help athletes achieve adequate vitamin D status: serum 25(OH)D of at least 75 or 80 nmol/L. These recommendations can include regular safe sun exposure (twice a week between the hours of 10 a.m. and 3 p.m. on the arms and legs for 5-30 min, depending on season, latitude, and skin pigmentation) or dietary supplementation with 1,000-2,000 IU vitamin D3 per day. Although this is significantly higher than what is currently considered the adequate intake, recent research demonstrates these levels to be safe and possibly necessary to maintain adequate 25(OH)D concentrations.

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